

By Congressman Robert C. "Bobby" Scott
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In my 33 years as an elected official, I learned that when it comes to crime policy, we have a choice – we can reduce crime or we can play politics. Reducing crime requires evidence-based strategies that identify youth at risk of becoming criminals and redirect them toward productive, law-abiding lives. Playing politics, on the other hand, involves waiting for crimes to occur and responding with simplistic slogans and sound bites – like "three strikes, you're out", "life without parole", "mandatory minimum sentencing", "truth-in-sentencing" and rhymes like "do the adult crime, do the adult time" – that sound good but do little or nothing to reduce crime.

Enacting slogan-based policies has caused incarceration levels in the U.S. to quadruple over the past 30 years from about 500,000 in 1980 to more than 2 million today. The U.S. now leads the world in incarceration. Research by the Pew Center on the States concluded that incarceration has diminishing returns above a rate of about 350 per 100,000, and above 500 per 100,000 such rates of incarceration actually become counter-productive. The average U.S. lockup rate is about 700 per 100,000 – roughly seven times the world average of about 100 per 100,000 – meaning that our nation's high rate of incarceration is actually increasing crime, not reducing it. The Children's Defense Fund has labeled this phenomenon the "Cradle to Prison Pipeline."

We spend an average annually of about \$29,000 per prisoner in the federal system. If we reduced the number of people in prison, we would save billions of taxpayer dollars each year – dollars that are currently being wasted on counter-productive incarceration. If we directed those savings toward the children who are most at risk of becoming involved in crime, we could spend thousands of dollars on each at-risk child every year enhancing their education and supporting them in a way that reduces the chance that they will get in trouble.

All the credible research and evidence shows that a continuum of comprehensive, evidence-based prevention and intervention initiatives for youth identified as being at risk will greatly reduce crime and save much more than they cost when compared to the avoided law enforcement and social welfare expenditures that would otherwise result. Teen pregnancy prevention, prenatal care, nurse home visits, Head Start, after-school programs, mentorships, and comprehensive job-training programs, among others, have all been scientifically proven to reduce crime and save money. They will effectively convert the "Cradle to Prison Pipeline" into a "Cradle to College and Career Pipeline" for children at greatest risk.

That's why Representative Walter Jones and I introduced the "Youth Prison Reduction through Opportunities, Mentoring, Intervention and Education Act", or "Youth PROMISE Act." This bipartisan legislation will engage a wide range of community stakeholders to serve on a local planning council to develop and implement evidence-based, locally-tailored violence prevention plans for their communities. The bill also builds on the strengths of local communities by

partnering with colleges and universities as regional research partners and establishes a National Research Center for Proven Juvenile Justice Practices at the Department of Justice. Studies have predicted an average cost savings of \$3 to \$5 for each one dollar invested in evidence-based prevention and intervention initiatives. The bill requires communities to reinvest some of those savings gained from reduced law enforcement and incarceration costs to fund the future operation of the plans. This allows the evidence-based, locally-tailored violence prevention plans to become self-sustaining after the initial federal funding expires.

Many policy makers at the state and federal level, unfortunately, have put too much emphasis on responding to crime. Why wait to respond to crime when we have reams of science and evidence to show that evidence-based programs applied in a comprehensive and collaborative manner, as the Youth PROMISE Act calls for, will save victims, taxpayers, our children and society from the ravages and enormous costs of crime?

The Youth PROMISE Act already has the support of over 300 national, state, and local government, professional, civil rights, education and religious organizations. And just last month, Democratic Senator Mary Landrieu of Louisiana and Republican Senator James Inhofe of Oklahoma introduced the bill in the United States Senate. I am hopeful that my colleagues in the House and Senate will work with us to pass the Youth PROMISE Act and finally do something to effectively stem the tide of violence engulfing so many of our communities.

Congressman Scott represents Virginia's 3rd District

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